

Scalera

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SPEAKERS

Robert Curvin, Nicholas Scalera


N Nicholas Scalera 00:00
And I'm doing this voluntarily as part of an educational contribution. And I'm very pleased to participate.

R Robert Curvin 00:12
Okay, Nick, why don't we start by you saying a little bit about where you grew up, where were you born, where you went to school and so on? Sure.

N Nicholas Scalera 00:21
I was born and raised in Newark and lived a good deal of my life in Newark. I was born in Columbus Hospital and lived initially first five years of my life on North 11th Street. And then housing got short. Right around the war, my parents moved to North Sixth Street in the Roseville section. And that's where I spent the rest of my time in Newark, on North Sixth Street, living in a small first floor flat in a two family home owned by my maternal grandparents. So-

R Robert Curvin 00:57
What did your parents do Nick?

N Nicholas Scalera 00:59
My mother as most of the mothers at the time were homemakers they stayed home to take care of the kids. I lived



R

Robert Curvin 01:08

and your parents had come to the US were they immigrants?

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Nicholas Scalera 01:12

All of my grandparents were immigrants from Italy from Southern Italy. My my my paternal grandparents came from a province right next to the province where my maternal grandparents came from. And they wound up living within doors of each other. North Sixth Street and that whole area was a sort of an Italian enclave. I can still go down North Sixth Street to this day and I can go down house by house and name every family on every floor that lived almost every family and every floor that lived on that block both sides of the street. That's how close this neighborhood was. My father worked originally for a pharmaceutical company as a salesman. And later when times got tough, he went back to the trade that he was taught originally by his uncle Louis Scalera, who founded with my grandfather, Nicholas Scalera, Nicola Scalera, the Scalera Furniture Company, which for years, was operating in Newark.

R

Robert Curvin 02:22

They made their own furniture?

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Nicholas Scalera 02:23

They made custom made Italian provincial furniture. Later on, they modernized it a little bit. My dad went there and worked as foreman of the furniture refinishing shop, he was a master at furniture refinishing could take raw wood or deeply cut wood and turn it into brand new and you wouldn't be able to find the original neck. So as I said, my mom stood home as all the mothers did. Our mothers did not drive, they did not go to work. They considered child rearing, their vocation. So we didn't have daycare.

R

Robert Curvin 02:57

Did you speak English in the house?

N

Nicholas Scalera 02:59

Yes, my grandparents all spoke Italian. Interestingly enough, my maternal grandmother spoke English quite well as well. And my paternal grandfather spoke English quite well, but the other two, only Italian. So I grew up in a sort of a bilingual culture. We used to, as kids, we used to say that our parents spoke Italian when they didn't want us to know what they were saying. But I did pick it up. And we learned we certainly learned the curse words. And, but it was the kind of environment in which everybody knew each other. And so there was a lot of interaction among neighbors, a lot of trust. Sort of a mutual support society, so to speak. We never locked our front doors or back doors. What I remember as a kid was all the different vendors that would

come through the neighborhood, the Italian peddlers, peddling produce, fresh vegetables etc. Our grandmothers and mothers would go out bargain like hell with them to get their best price sometimes by a bushel, and then sit and share the, divide the-

R

Robert Curvin 04:11

They would come by with the horse drawn carts ?

N

Nicholas Scalera 04:13

Horse drawn carts. Then they\re were we used to call them rag men they were the guys that picked up trash and stuff

R

Robert Curvin 04:19

Picked up the (unintelligable)

N

Nicholas Scalera 04:21

and brought it in. We had a milkman we had a Dugan's man which was the local bakery on Fourth Street. We even had the little the I guess it was called the scissors sharpener guy he came around with a pushcart and and sharpened scissors and knives, etc. We also have going to use an Italian phrase now Biangolin' man. Biangolin' was the Italian word for bleach and they used to come by in a pushcart and bring these gallons of bleach and they would go right into the basement. It was, again, no doors were locked. Put it in there and then you would pay him every so many weeks. We had a coal man who would come and carry the coal and then somebody'd send it down a chute because we had coal stoves. In fact, interestingly enough, some of my the kids that I mentor in these days my former DYFS kids get a kick out of this one, when I tell them that my first experience at barbecued chicken or barbecued steak was my dad barbecuing in the coal oven. So much for the toxic coal fields ---

R

Robert Curvin 05:33

Right in the coal oven.

N

Nicholas Scalera 05:35

Right in the coal oven. And I went to I went to the local public Grammar School right down the street, a block away. It used to be called James A Garfield Grammar School. Now it's the William Horton school. I graduated there, and then went on to Seton Hall Prep very much because of the intervention of a seventh grade teacher who I will never forget. She was had an amazing influence on the path that my life ultimately took because she she said she called me in one day her name was Miss Mildred O'Callahan. She was that wonderful spinster woman, I can still draw a picture of her with her funny, purple hair. But I have great and deep respect for her.

One day, she called me and said, Nicholas, take this note on to your father. And of course I panicked. They never said take it to your mother. That would have been a lot easier. But it was all closed and oh god. I said, Well, what did I do? She said, No, this has nothing to do it. Just take it. So I brought it home. I gave it to my mother. I said, Mom, why don't you open it? She says, no it's for your father. So, at the end of the day, we met in the kitchen, where all Italian families met for the important decisions of life. And he opened it. And he said, I said, Well, your teacher wants to see me. What did you do? Did you do something wrong? I said, No, I didn't do anything wrong. I don't know. She wants to talk to me about your academics. Well I got all As. Maybe one B I don't know. He goes, well, I don't know, I got to leave work. I can't afford it. But then my mum stepped in and he saw the light. And so he took off and all of us went. And in the end what she said was I think Nick has potential and he's on a track where he's going to graduate in January. And he's gonna wind up going to Barringer. No disrespect, my mother went there. My dad did Barringer, nighttime. All (unintelligible) Scalera families went there. And but she said, I really think he should go to Seton Hall Prep, I think you'll get a better education and he he should go to college. And that's what she basically she said, he said, Well, how are we going to do that? (Unintelligible). She said, Well, you should go and you should ask the principal to have him skipped. And I happen to know that there's there's another deal already in the works for another student who really doesn't deserve it. I'm not going to repeat his name.

R

Robert Curvin 08:02

You knew this person?

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Nicholas Scalera 08:03

Oh yeah sure. You would skip a half a grade and you'd graduate in June. So my dad said, well, we'll go home and talk. And we'll get back to you. So we went home, we had a big discussion. And I remember this is why I think when I talk with my kids, that I mentor, who think that I was born rich, is that my parents were so confused. They didn't know whether that was the right thing to do the wrong thing to do. And they had nobody that they could talk to. I remember them agonized well who could we call. There's nobody in the family in college, who would we ask. They ultimately asked me, and I was just well, I'll do whatever. If Ms. O'Callahan thinks it's a good idea, I'll do it. And in the end, they they went ahead with her recommendation because they trusted her teachers were held in far higher esteem in those days than they are now. So they did it and then they followed her lead. She stayed in the background, they went to the principal. And they said that they would like me to skip so I could apply to Seton Hall Prep. When he initially sort of hesitated they reminded him that they knew that there were other kids that were being considered and then he saw the light and there was and so I skipped and I went to Seton Hall Prep.

R

Robert Curvin 09:19

So were the other kids politically connected or?

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Nicholas Scalera 09:22

One.

R

Robert Curvin 09:22

One was. Politics meant a lot, didn't it?

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Nicholas Scalera 09:26

It did. The other one wasn't. And in the end, I think turned it down. I know his name too, but I won't repeat them. Anyway, that's how I got to Seton Hall Prep. I applied. I took the exam. I got in and it was one of the turning points in my life. I will never forget Miss Mildred O'Callaghan and her purple hair and curly things. Because I don't know what would have happened to maybe I would have also done well and Barringer in the light and gone on to college. I don't know. But I do know that this path worked.

R

Robert Curvin 10:01

And Seton Hall was definitely a track a route to higher ed.

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Nicholas Scalera 10:06

It was. It was automatic, and I thought I was a star at Garfield school when I got to Seton Hall Prep, my wings were clipped. In the first semester, I really struggled. First of all, I had to take two buses, the 6 Crosstown to South Orange Ave then the 54 to Vine and we'd walk up, right behind your house here. And go in the back door. And that was a long commute. But in those days, unlike today's kids whose parents travel all over taking them to soccer leagues and this and ballet and the rest. We wouldn't even think of asking a father to drive us he had to work, our mothers didn't drive. Right. So there was no alternative. We - it wasn't even in our consciousness. It was well, you have to take a bus, how many buses, two, so it's two. I'm saying we liked it. But we didn't. Several from my neighborhood. Some of the some of the kids in my neighborhood got in and we all went up together and came back and after one semester of adjusting at Seton Hall Prep, I did quite well finished really well. And at that point, it was clear that I wanted to go to college and everybody wanted me to my grandparents, my father and my mother. And I had another one of those famous meetings in my kitchen in North sixth street with my dad. He actually my mother said, Your father wants to see you in the kitchen. And I always I was always it's sort of a dangerous situation. I said, why? Well, so I don't know. You'll have to see. She knew very well. She said you'll have to go in there and talk to him. So I went in and I said What's up dad? He said, Listen, your mother and I've been talking and we want you to go to college. But as you know, we don't have enough money. So you can't go away. So if you want to go to college, you have to go to Seton Hall. I was ecstatic. I jumped up and down, I hugged and kissed him. My mother start crying I hugged her. Today kids are applying to 25 or 50 schools, and they pay enormous amounts of money and I tell the kids that I've mentored. I have one choice, but I was happy as a lark. I was so pleased. And I did very well at Seton Hall, I love the school, I'm very active as alumnus, maybe too active. Follow the baseball team. I'm on

the President's Advisory Council. You know, I spent eight years up here. And so Seton Hall Prep and the university are very much a part of who I am. And what define me as a person as an adult.

R

Robert Curvin 12:40

Following that, after college, what did you, what did you major in Nick?

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Nicholas Scalera 12:44

I majored in social studies. Not having any idea, really what I wanted to do. My grandparents, like all Italian immigrants wanted me to be a doctor, so did my father so I can take care of him. He was a really an aw- a terrible hypochondriac. Bless his heart I think he, I used to say you're gonna worry yourself to death, and I think he did. But so I took that. And then towards the end, I had to start applying. So I applied to law schools. And I was the editor of the Setonian, the college weekly. In fact, I served as editor longer than anybody had up to that point. I don't know now, or since then. And so I applied to Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. And ultimately, I got accepted to different schools. Including, but when the Columbia one came in, and again, knowing that I couldn't afford to go away, my parents just didn't have it. And there weren't the financial supports or scholarships, then that there are now. So when I got the acceptance from Columbia again, I was ecstatic. And I decided, well, you know, it's, it's an act of Providence. That's where I'm going. And my parents were like, Yeah, good. You could stay at home and then you can commute from Newark and I, I tell him, Look, I really, I really can't do that. I mean, it's just too much. This was a full time course. A one year master's program. We worked 40 hours a week in class or on assignment. So I got a little tiny apartment on Riverside Drive a block from school. And that was another rude awakening because I thought I was a hotshot, leaving Seton Hall and then I faced the stiffest academic competition that ever faced in my life. It just made me more determined to beat I wound up graduating cum laude from Columbia, which was I don't know how I did it. But I think it was just that I was determined to prove that these kids that said, "What is Seton Hall? Is that a lady is that a women's college? In Pennsylvania?" I said, "No, no" So And as a result of that I got into my first job as a professional journalist was for the Newark Evening news. I was assigned to Elizabeth office. Which was wonderful because I got to cover every imaginable story. You know, from the lady that celebrated her 100th birthday to police stories, to in depth features, breaking news, you name it. So it was a really great experience as a young journalist, then I was transferred to Montclair to the Montclair office. And I was assigned the town of Belleville, which couldn't have been a better because it's a political hotbed. Even more so than than maybe it is now. And one of my my big story was, I wound up but covering the city council meeting and I got a parking ticket outside City Hall. So I was talking to one of the councilman who was a sort of gadfly, his name was James R Golden. How he won, no one knew. But he did. And he told me one day I was interviewing for another story. And he said, By the way, I told him about my ticket. And he said, he says, don't pay it. I said, What do you mean, I have to pay it. He said, No, I'm not sure. You have to check the facts. But I don't think the town ever got state government approval yet. They have to get approved for every meter ordinance that a town puts up. It's got to be approved by the Attorney General's office. I don't think they have ever bothered. I said are you sure? He says "Yeah, but don't quote me because I'm not sure." And it turns out he was dead, right. I broke the story it ran on the front page as a first person. Because I filed. I pleaded innocent. And I wrote my own brief, I had no lawyer (unintelligable)

newspaper man. And I went to court, municipal court. And the judge said it was Judge Abramson. He said, He says, he said, Well, this is very interesting. Mr. Stewart and the town attorney was Jack Cyriano. A really nice guy, I felt bad for him. He said, Mr. Cyriano what do you have to say about this young man's-? He said, Well, Your Honor, I'm really not prepared. I mean, I need time, I need time to review the - his brief. I need to have this (unintelligible). So the judge said, "Well. All right, I'll, I'll grant this short, delay, maybe two weeks." And he said, Mr. Scalera, I'm gonna carry, hold this over. And I'm instructing you or ordering you some words to that effect, that you're not to write anything about this in the newspaper. And I knew I was going to do it. So I didn't answer it. I didn't say yes. And I didn't say no, I just kept quiet. He said, Do you understand? I say, Yes, I do, your honor. And I went back, I called the city editor and he said, Get your ass down here right away and write the stories in first person. I said the judge told me, I was bound not to. He said, I understand that but you're going to write the story. I said, okay. I want to s- I went down to Newark headquarters. I sat there, I was worried. I thought, Oh, my God, I'm going to be I'm going to be arrested. My mother and father are going to kill me. My grandparents are going to say I disgraced the family. But I did it. And it ran on the front page. In fact, it got picked up on the A wire, the associated press ran all over the world because little guy beats City Hall, they love that kind of stuff. It was a really inconsequential when you look at in terms of big stories, but it was important, I think for them. Well, the city went absolutely bonkers. In fact, the next morning, I called my cousin who was Nick Scalera was the Judge assignment judge of Essex County. And I call him I said, Nick, I said, did you look at the Newark News? He says, Yeah, why? I said, I'm on the front page. I said, but the thing is, Judge Abramson ordered me not to. He says, oh, Eddie's a good guy. He said, I said, What should I do? I don't know if he's seen it yet. He said, call him. Tell him that you meant no disrespect to his court. And mention that you know that I'm your cousin and all. I said, Okay, so tell him I told you to call. So I did it. I called I got him. He had not seen the Newark News. So I'm saying, Your Honor. You know, I'm calling (unintelligible). I wrote the story it's on the front page of the Newark News. I don't know if you've had a chance to he says, no, no, no, just a minute. He sends a secretary to go by it. He says stay on the line. I want to read it. And then he comes back and he's reading the story. And He's liking it. It made him look good. That's what I think. And it made him look good. So I said I meant no disrespect, he said, he said, Mr. Scalera. This is a very fair and unbiased account. Don't worry about a thing you will not be held in contempt. Thank you for much for the courtesy of your call, oh god, I was so relieved. I got letters from people all over the world. Almost every continent, saying Good for you, you beat City Hall, good good good.

R

Robert Curvin 20:15

What I love too, though is the part about your this is your uncle being the judge.

N

Nicholas Scalera 20:22

He was my dad's first cousin

R

Robert Curvin 20:23

He was your dad's first cousin. Well the family relationships and the the ascendancy of the Scaleras through the political system is quite an impressive part of the story, too.

N

Nicholas Scalera 20:39

Yeah, it part of us. Yeah, there's no question. Nick was the first member of his family to go to high school to go to college. He went to Notre Dame. And then he went (unintelligible). I was the first member of both sides of my family to go to prep school and college. So I always felt some of that and God, why did I have to be the first, because everybody's watching me in my office, and my aunts would always say, You have to do what your cousin did. And you know, cousins don't like that they're gonna kill me one day.

R

Robert Curvin 21:13

So when When did you join the guard?

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Nicholas Scalera 21:17

Right after Columbia, and that in those days, there was a draft. And I had gotten educational deferments for school. And-

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Robert Curvin 21:28

You finish Columbia, what year?

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Nicholas Scalera 21:32

June of 64. And then I went, I went to I went over to Europe and studied at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland under a program called the British university system. It really was only to take one eight week course. And when I talked to my dad, I knew he wasn't going to buy this. I told him it was part of this important part of my education. And he said, Yeah, well, that's unfortunate, because we're not paying. So when I got a scholarship to cover, the tuition was only one course eight week course. And in the room and board, which was in an international student hostel right on the grounds of University of Edinburgh. My mother got to him, she was convinced this was very important and bless her heart. He had to cave again. So his deal was alright, so you got your mother. I'll pay for a roundtrip ticket to Europe that's it, you're on your own. So I did it. And before I did, I was I got further deferment until September, when I came back then I toured around Europe after the eight weeks.

R

Robert Curvin 22:43

You knew how to do it, by then.

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Nicholas Scalera 22:46

By then I could do it. And he didn't know that my grandmother's or my mother used to send me

wire me money every so often at the American Express offices in Paris. Anyway, when I got back, I knew that it was time to I had to do something. So I applied to the the Orange Armory. On Dey St. in Orange. I also applied to the US Naval Reserve in Lakehurst. In fact, I got the best physical I think I've ever had, then or since at the Navy, Lakehurst Reserve. And I signed up. There were waiting lists. And I was in a race against the draft. So I thought, "Well, I've done everything I can do." So I went to work, my first professional job as a reporter for the Newark News, late September 64. And within four months, I got a call from the National Guard in Orange, saying that they had had an opening. And was I still interested? Yes. So I ran down the physical, the doctor said, Hi, how old are you? I was like, 23. He said, good. He said, How do you feel. I feel good. Great. You just passed the physical. He signed it. And he handed. So I got I got inducted shortly thereafter by the company commander. And that began what turned out to be a six year obligation. Six months-

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Robert Curvin 24:23

This was like 66? 65?

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Nicholas Scalera 24:26

No it was I went to basic training in January 65, came out in June. Then I had five and a half years of what's called active reserve, which meant one weekend a month, for those five and a half years and two weeks, every summer and resisted all the attempts to get me to become an officer. Because we have to do the testing. They kept telling me you have to go to OCS, Officer Candidate School. No, I don't want to go there. I just want to do my time to get out. So I wound up was company clerk. I was the Radar of my unit. If you know MASH. And but it was good because the company clerk worked for the sergeant major who really ran the company.

R

Robert Curvin 25:12

Right. He was the power he was the power like the political machine leader, right?

N

Nicholas Scalera 25:17

Yeah...(Unintelligible). So there I am. When I got back, I went back to work for the, for the Newark News, and stayed there for at least two, at least two years. Getting a little fuzzy right now. But actually, my my, my meter story in Belleville, got the attention of the Associated Press. And I got called by the AP in Philadelphia office, they offered me a job and I took it. I worked for the Associated Press in Philadelphia. But before I took that job, I had filed for public information officer civil service tests in the state of New Jersey. I did that because I was frustrated writing for the Newark Evening News about other people doing things. And it was a part of me that wanted to do things myself. I wanted to get involved in world poverty, social services, etc. So I thought, well, this job was in the Office of Economic Opportunity, which government used it to set up the first anti poverty agency of any state in the country. So I thought, Oh, this will be a perfect way. I'll get it out of my system for two years. And I'll go back to journalism, and 28 years later, whatever. So I got called. I was only working for the Associated Press about six or eight months. And I got a call from the state or a letter I don't

remember telling me I finished first on the open competitive exam. And they had to, there were no veterans ahead of me, they had to hire me if I wanted. Big debate again at home, trying to explain. My dad was all for it, take it. He hated the journalism profession. He didn't like my hours didn't like the pay, which was awful, absolutely awful. He kept saying I paid all this money to for you to get a master's. And that's all they're paying you. It's disgraceful. And so he was very much for going with the state. And he was big on security, having grown up at a time when the Depression had hit his family and my mother's family quite hard. So they went for government jobs were secure. That's what he thought. I had no idea what he was talking about, really. I mean, I just listened politely. But I really didn't have the depth of understanding. I know now, when I look back, right, how important it was for him to know that his son was going to be secure. He was quite right about that, by the way. So I went to work for the first Office of Economic Opportunity. And within a year, Governor Hughes created the Department of Community Affairs. Think it was made for 67? I'm not sure. Yeah. And we were blended in the Office of Economic Opportunity blended into the new Department of Community Affairs, Paul Ylvisacker was named as the first commissioner. And I ultimately was made the Assistant Chief of the Bureau of Public Information of that new department. worked under John Kolesar who's a fantastic writer and reporter. And personality. And personality, yeah. I learned so much from John was a really nice supplement to my Columbia education. And later, Ylvisacker promoted Kolesar to Deputy Commissioner and me to Chief of the Office of Public Information. I was in my 20s! 27, maybe, I don't know. And it was a wonderful opportunity. There's another if I had to pick three people he'd be the second one besides Ms. O'Callaghan Paul Ylvisacker for seeing something in me to give me that opportunity. I mean, as a kid of immigrant, grandchild, a grandparents from Newark, going to that kind of thing so early. It was unheard of. No one would believe it. Even in my neighborhood. They didn't even know what the Office of Economic opportunity was or Department of Community Affairs was. My little Italian grandmother on my father's side, she used to say, "But what do you do? What do you do?" I said, "Well it's hard to explain grandma. I work for the state government in New Jersey and Trenton." "Oh, but what do you do?" "Well, I I write news releases and-" She had absolutely no idea she knew doctor, lawyer, salesman, peddler. That was about it. I'll tell you one interesting story. I was I was in the office one day and my secretary said, "There's a lady on the phone and I'm not sure. I think it's your grandmother. She speaks, she can't speak very good English." I said, "Oh, God, it's her. Did you tell her I'm here?" She said, "Yes. You should speak to your grandmother." My dear Annie. I said, "Oh Okay. Put her on." So she (said), "Hello? Who's this?" I said, "it's Nick. It's your grandson." "Oh, how are you?" "I'm doing good gram. Why? What's up? Are you alright?" "Yeah, yeah. Guess what? I made a m- for you." "That's an Italian sweet pie." She knew I liked it. I said, "Well," I said, "Oh, that's terrific. I said, I'll be over one night this week." "No, you're coming for dinner tonight." "Tonight?" I said, "Really? I don't think I can make it tonight." She says, "Okay. You big shot in Trenton? In Washington?" she says. I said, "No, I'm a big shot in Trenton neither Washington. And I'll be there. What time?" And I went. When I got home, I said to my dad, I complained. I said, "Grandma-". He said, "That's between you and your grandmother. Don't get me in the middle of that. Get your ass over here." And I did. And I had a wonderful time with her. And you know, at the time, I was like, troubled by it. I'd think, oh my god, she doesn't understand. But later was a wonderful expression of her own way of showing love. You know, she didn't know how to do it.

R

Robert Curvin 31:28

She loved you. She wanted to see you.

N

Nicholas Scalera 31:30

What other way then through food? Italians like food. They celebrate with food. So those little anecdotes, maybe I'm talking too much.

R

Robert Curvin 31:38

No, this is wonderful. So when the, so let's let's now talk about the riot, and rebellion whatever. So you had you were? Were you called up?

N

Nicholas Scalera 31:52

Yes, I was. I was Chief of the Office of the Bureau of Public Information and Community Affairs Department. And Jim Rubin from the Associated Press at the State House calls me he said, "Hey, Nick, aren't you in some National Guard unit in Orange?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "Well. Don't quote me, but I just saw something come over the ticker. I think you've been called to active duty in Vietnam." I said, "What? I said, I'm hanging up, I'll be over in a second. I'm hung up. I ran to the statehouse. I went to the associated press officer, where is it? And I'm reading he shows it to me, and I'm reading it. And lo and behold, it's the 156th Transportation Battalion, I think it was the 144th Transportation Company within the battalion activated for duty in Vietnam. So my heart dropped, oh my god. It was only until I think the next day or the day after that, the facts begin to get sorted out. And it turned out that they took the battalion, they took the company, they took the medical unit, but they didn't take Headquarters and Headquarters Company, which is what I was assigned to as the company clerk because they had an administrative structure already in Vietnam. They just needed the trucks and, and the truck drivers and their medics, the medics and the docks, and the dentists, which was in our unit as well. So that's how close I came to being activated to Vietnam. So it was in July of 67 when the Newark Riots hit. And this is another story. I'm at, I'm spending a weekend at my parents, they rented a house in Ortleigh Beach. They had both grandmothers there. My grandfathers had both died. My mother, and were over there for the weekend. Because I was still working, they went down for two weeks or whatever it was. And this was their time to have a big, typical Italian Sunday dinner. And I had the radio on. I hear the radio saying Governor Richard Hughes has just activated the 156th Transportation Battalion in Orange, New Jersey. What? So I'm listening. My father said, "what what's the matter?" I said, "Wait a second, I want to hear something. I put on another station. And I heard it again. I said, my my national Guard unit has just been activated. I have to report to duty as soon as possible." My father got up and he shut the radio off said "You didn't hear nothing." "What do you mean? I definitely heard it." He ran in he told my mother he told my grandmothers. I said, "I gotta go. I gotta get my my stuff. And I've gotta drive up and then report. The governor's just ordered it." My father said "You don't know, he doesn't know where you're at. You don't have a radio down here. Just sit there. Yeah. How can you leave your mother just made a big dinner? I'm about to serve, you're going to walk out in this. What kind of a son are you?" I'm like "Mom, please do something." Meanwhile, my Grandmother Scalera started crying hysterically, "Oh no, you can't leave" grabbing and hugging me. I'm like "God, do something, get her out of here. I'm going." So after all that I did miss the whole meal. I packed up. And I drove up. And I reported for duty. And that's how I got involved in in the Newark Riots. They needed our company because we were transporting the combat troops, so to speak, from the different armories into the riot zone.

R

Robert Curvin 35:43

So had you as a part of this unit? Had your unit ever had any exercises about riot control?

N

Nicholas Scalera 35:53

No, absolutely not. Our mission was, like all military organizations was to close with and destroy the enemy. We were not trained in community policing, in community relations, or in dealing with domestic disturbances, even though it's called National Guard, it wasn't part of our training.

R

Robert Curvin 36:16

What did the commander, say to you? You know, you know, I'm a former Army officer. And so I'm thinking about what I would have, if I were commanding a unit that had been asked to perform a, an unfamiliar assignment, you begin to think about, well, how do I protect my troops to really do this and a to protect themselves for safety reasons, but also to do what best they can do. So what was the, what was the game plan?

N

Nicholas Scalera 36:53

I do remember, I can't remember his name, but I do remember, we were given a charge by the company commander or the commander, one of the other, more likely the battalion commander was a colonel. And what he said was, this is different than a military combat. These are my words, but they were words to that effect. I remember him saying that rather than close with and destroy the enemy, we were dealing, our mission was to restrain and contain the rioting. That we were in a support role to the Newark Police and the State Police. But that we were to use our weapons if necessary. So it was sort of a positive kind of talk.

R

Robert Curvin 37:48

Certainly sensible under the circumstances

N

Nicholas Scalera 37:50

it was, but I think it went over the heads of most of the guys in the unit.

R

Robert Curvin 37:55

You live what I wanted to ask you, can you do you have any recollections of the kind of people that were your colleagues and associates? Where were they from? What kind of educational experiences that they have? They all have similar roots to, you know, to the guard?

N

Nicholas Scalera 38:11

No, no, no, very, very few. Yeah, maybe on one hand, if that had college degrees, all were either elementary school or high school graduates at most blue collar types, it was almost an exclusively white unit. They came from the suburbs of Newark, and some from Newark like myself, are still living in Newark. And most of them had little or no interaction with Black or Latinos at all, at all, and, and their perceptions of them were very much couched in negative racial stereotypes.

R

Robert Curvin 38:58

And did they express this kind of thing?

N

Nicholas Scalera 39:01

Absolutely. The most frightening thing that I remember was watching some of my fellow guardsmen react in a racially antagonistic way. I mean, in terms of what they said, out loud, they were there were sentiments like, "We gotta get these niggers. They don't appreciate everything we're doing for them. Well very, very angry, stereotypical, anti black. In those days, we used the word negro. But nigger was what they used. Absolutely."

R

Robert Curvin 39:44

What they used. The epithet.

N

Nicholas Scalera 39:45

Yeah. And they considered me sort of an aberration because they knew I used to argue with them long before the riots about some of the work I was doing and I would present statistics at all, which would just annoy them because they didn't know how to refute the statistics, and they had no personal interactions, as a basis for understanding what I was trying to say about interracial relations. They had no black friends. They didn't have any context. So this brought out I would say, it brought out the worst of people, not all of them, but the majority. And it scared me.

R

Robert Curvin 40:26

You know at ome point, they, it appears that they went from being called up, not being prepared, just being put out on the street, being told that they're in support of the Newark Police, but then moving to a point where they became triply (?) aggressive and began using their weapons in a rather reckless way. Do you do you is that too simple a path?

N

Nicholas Scalera 41:01

No, I think for some of them, that's exactly what happened. Our our role as a Transportation Battalion where we trucked our troopers from different units, including our own company, to the Roseville Avenue Armory, and from there they were dispatched into the riot district. I wasn't because I was company clerk. So I stayed in the unit in Orange or was brought to Roseville Avenue at the command headquarters. This is an interesting story. One day Sergeant Major calls me and he said, "Who the hell do you know?" Said, "What're talking about Sarge?" He goes, "Command headquarters in Roseville Avenue. You're ordered to report there. So, what are you going to do? Why are you going there?" I said, "I have no way in hell, I don't know what you're talking about." He says, "Well just remember, don't say anything you would want us to hear." I said, "I don't have any idea what you're talking about." He says, "Well get the Jeep and get your ass down there. " So I drive down to the Roseville Avenue Armory. I get there I ask where headquarters is I go, I knock on the door. And some guy answered. I said, I said I was in my uniform. I said I'm Specialist In Class Scalera. I was told to report here and I looked around and I see Ylvisacker, Dr. Ylvisacker in the corner. He sees me comes running over. And I said, "Sergeant Scalera reporting for duty, sir." He broke up. He said, "Come on in." I said, "Paul, what's this all about?" He said, "Oh the governor wants to talk to you." I said "What?" He said, "You know the governor's over here." So I was really, I was starting to wonder worry about what they wanted so I...

R

Robert Curvin 42:43

So Paul knew that you had been called up.

N

Nicholas Scalera 42:44

Well he knew Yeah. Because I had to call him. So I went in and the governor's there. And ultimately, I sit down and the governor said, "Yes. You know, young man, I'd like to know. Have you heard any stories about National Guardsmen killing innocent negros?" I said, "Yes, Governor, I have heard those stories. I haven't witnessed any with my own eyes. But I've heard stories from colleagues that came back from the riot zone. And even if you dismiss or reduce some of the exaggeration that obviously was part of it. I have reason to think that some of that was true." He said, he said, "Really?" I said there was a story of one where I was told that right outside this Roseville Avenue Armory, far from the riot district an innocent black man was walking along and National Guardsmen grabbed him, beat him up and pushed him into a sewer. Now I heard that from at least three different sources of guys in my unit, who swore that they were telling the truth. I don't know if they witnessed it themselves. But they heard they heard it from others. So it was a lot of second and third hand stuff. But I told the governor, I said, "I can only tell you what I've heard. I can't tell you what I saw." And I told him, and then I worried about what the sergeant had told me, what the commander had told me but so I said, we got all done. And Paul said, "Thank you so much. The governor just needed some independent, he's checking independent sources just to see if he can corroborate some of these rumors. " And then later the Newark News did run articles about exactly that.

R

Robert Curvin 44:30

About that, that incident or similar.

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Nicholas Scalera 44:33

Similar incidents where they were innocent people were being beat up or harassed. There were stories in one article where we're National Guard went around and they sprayed, shot all the front windows of Black retail owners who had "Soul Brothers" in their window they broke them up, just so that they wouldn't escape.

R

Robert Curvin 44:56

Now. The Riot Commission actually makes a big point that that was done mainly by the State Police. But you think the guards participated.

N

Nicholas Scalera 45:07

It could have been the state police. Because in those days everything was so blurred. I can't tell which was which. There was even a famous story of where the Newark, uh, the State Police were shooting at the National Guardsmen or the Newark police were shootin at the National Guardsman. Blaming it on snipers. So that thing, a lot of that got blended. And then there's always the the exaggeration factor, which clearly was a part of it.

R

Robert Curvin 45:36

Now, let's, let's go to post riot. And you're still in the unit, right? Was there any discussion about what happened? And did you hear any feedback on how these guys felt about what they did? Or?

N

Nicholas Scalera 45:53

Yeah, they were, there was a lot of sort of post riot analysis going on in typical army type talk, trash talk. The niggas got what they deserved. Stuff like that. And, you know, I did what I could to try to show that, that what they were talking about, is a very small handful of people, the rioters were a small percentage of the community and what these guys were doing, were assigning blame to all African American residents of Newark, as if it was a mass movement of sorts. It wasn't, I mean, the African Americans suffered more deaths than anyone. And, you know, as the as Governor Hughes once said, you know, civil disobedience cannot be tolerated. The problem was the guys in the Guard, and so many others, I'm sure in the state police and Newark Police although I'm not I wasn't in those units, but in the National Guard, they had no concept of the living conditions, the lack of opportunity, all the things that I was learning and working on a daily basis in the Community Affairs Department. They had no sense of, of what could have triggered that kind of, of an outbreak, and no sympathy or understanding of it. None.

R

Robert Curvin 47:25

I'm really struck by Paul Ylvisacker's genius about these things, and it was very clear that he

knew that you would tell the truth, and that he really understood that it was important to get truth telling to the governor. And as you probably know, ultimately, he was the one who engineered the meeting between me and the governor. And Tom Hayden and the governor where we convinced them that with Ylvisacker's major help that they should pull the troops out t the end.

N

Nicholas Scalera 48:06

Yes. Yeah. Paul was an incredible genius in bringing about compromise and discussion. You know, he, he later when I got back into my active duty stint was, I was on active duty for at least four days. And I got back. I mean, the first thing, one of the first things he did was call me into his office and say, "I want you to write all your recollections and reflections ."which I gave. He said, "Just do it a stream of consciousness, don't worry about form just-" So I put on my journalist hat, and I wrote everything that I remembered. which I'm trying to do now. And obviously, back then I had a hell of a lot better recollections, it was so fresh in my mind. Yeah. So I did do that. And then later in September, he asked me, the governor was convinced I in my first piece, I suggested that the National Guard needed to be revamped. And it needed to be integrated. And ultimately, all that, I mean, that all happened. They set up a separate waiting list exclusively for Blacks and minorities. And under that provision, I brought in a huge number of African American guys into my unit in Orange. Which really further caused tension and angered my white friends, very much so. So when we went out on when we were in camp in the summer, or even do what do you call those training missions? Bivouac. I would I would I would be careful to bunk right near my Black friends because I didn't trust- I really didn't. Yeah yeah, Yeah, they were nice to me, in front of my, in my face, but I was not so sure about what they might do. They were very resentful that there was a specialist that the governor had done this and they were getting special treatment. Now some of that really worked because some of the some of the fact that there were now African American troops in the in the unit did have an impact. And you could see, because then you begin to see people as individual people, not by the color of their skin. And some of that really began to turn the opinions of some of these guys because they had to have guard duty with them. They had it they have bivouac with them. They had to sit down and eat with them. And so there was genius to that recommendation. Whoever did it. I don't remember who it was. But it worked. One funny story, when I resumed on guard duty I was during the riots. At the end we would be we would go back to the orange armory and we would sleep in our in our what we call those

R

Robert Curvin 51:10

The bunks? Cots?

N

Nicholas Scalera 51:12

The blankets.

R

Robert Curvin 51:14

Oh oh the sleeping bags?

N

Nicholas Scalera 51:17

Sleeping bags. And so, and even though we were in Orange, the company commander had us post guard duty, with loaded M-16s in the in, in the yard in the outside yard outside the Orange Armory, even though there's a fence around it. And I had that gig one night with Tony Tony Cucolo of Orange used to play Seton Hall basketball, and we're on guard duty and there's nobody we're far from Newark. We're far from the Riot area. And we're there. In fact, we were actually drinking a couple of beers. And all of a sudden I hear "Hello, Nikki is are you there?" And Tony's going, "Halt. Halt or I'll shoot." I said, "Will you stop it? I think it's my uncle." He's going, "What are you talking about? We're supposed to shoot." I said, "Tony, stop. It sounds like my uncle." So I'm like, "Uncle Len?" "Yes. Where are you?" I said, "Uncle Len what are you doing?" I go to the fence. And it's my uncle. My mother's sister's husband. They lived across the street from us in Newark. They were my mother and father were still at the shore remember. So here's what happened. My mother, typical Italian mother. She's concerned I wasn't going to eat well. So she calls her sister Rose. And she says, "You have to make eggplant Parmesan sandwiches and get them to my son because I don't think he's going to eat well. The Army's food is lousy." So Aunt Rose makes eggplant parmesean, she made 13 or 14 sandwiches, she sends my uncle, and you weren't supposed to drive around at night because of the situation. He comes over, "You're aunt" Oh he says, "Your mommy was concerned." Here I am. 27 years old. "Your mommy was concerned that you weren't going to eat. So your aunt made eggplant parmeseans." I said "I can't open this gate." And Tony said, "Wait a second. Just a minute. Can you throw them over the fence?" "Sure" my uncle said, "Sure." He talked to a very slow way. I said, alright, I'll throw him over. So 13 sandwiches, all packaged, thrown over. Tony and I had two each or so. And then Tony wanted to go in and sell the rest to the rest of the guys. I said, "Hell no. My aunt made these. I'll give them away." And I picked the ones I was guys (unintelligible). They liked it. But it was another example. You know, at times. They express their concerns so much with food. And it's part of my culture. Yeah. And I realized later, you know, my mother, just was worried.

R

Robert Curvin 53:58

I got about about six, seven minutes left on this tape an hour long tape, this has been fabulous. But I want to switch to for a few minutes to now and young people in the city. And I mean, my sense is that this is the missing piece of the Renaissance. This is the the area. I mean, it's not only education, but it's just the absence of jobs, the the violence in the neighborhoods, the lack of safety, the lack of recreational facilities, adequate recreational facilities for kids. Do you have any thoughts about this?

N

Nicholas Scalera 54:39

Yeah, I should have said I didn't earlier but on May 1 1972, I took a job as a first assistant director of the newly created Division of Youth and Family Services, DYFUS. It was set up in the then the Department of Institutions and Agencies and I had the luxury of working with the first director, Fred Skank, who was my boss over in Community Affairs. So we went over together. And we had six months, Governor Cahill set this up, we had six months to develop this new structure for the division. And we did it. It went operational in January 1, 1973. So that led to a 22 year career with the Division of Youth and Family Services, the first 17 as assistant director

and the last five as the state director. So, yeah, I got a really good feel and understanding of issues affecting the children of New Jersey, the vast majority of the kids that are under DYFUS supervision, now it has a new name, why they changed it, I don't know. But are, are children who come out of dysfunctional families, mainly poor families, or families with little or no opportunity. And I continue. When I ultimately left DYFUS and started my own consulting business, I was hired by a company to set up a children's residential treatment facility. I insisted that it'd be in Newark. So it'd be an urban education. And we had 110 adolescent boys, who were the most seriously disturbed kids in the whole DYFUS system coming from all over the state, in a facility on Frelinghuysen Avenue. And I was pressed by the national corporation to ultimately serve as director, I was the consultant for the project, planned it and all but then he pressed me into serving as director. So I really got to meet and see it was a very interesting experience, because I was at the top of the pyramid, then I was right at the grassroots level. And really got to know all 110 of those, those boys. 30 of them, I still mentor they're in their 20s, now. They've attached themselves to my family, because they have no families of their own or no trusting intact (with them). And so when you talk about the kids of the urban areas Newark and others, and the press always asked me what what do I think is the single most important thing we could do to help kids make out of that kind of situation. And while you could give all the other you know, typical lists of employment and all of it, very, very important stuff. To me, the most important thing is that every child needs a stable family or a surrogate family, to support them. Without it, these other support services are not likely to make a major difference. And I think that's what we're experiencing. Now. The kids that I still mentor, who are now in their 20s, they never had an intact family. They didn't they never knew who to call when they had concerns or issues or questions. The way you might call your dad or your uncle. There was somebody always there with an open door and an open ear. These kids don't have it. And so they will make impulsive decisions. And more often than not, they make wrong decisions. They make dumb decisions. And they suffer the consequences of once they get caught in the juvenile justice system, chances are they'll never recover from it. So, because what happens at some point is that they give up and once you when they lose hope anything's possible, then they do the really strangest and the most self destructive things, even to the point of suicide. Yeah. So now how do you do that? That's the that's the most difficult question to answer. Because you need you need intact families. Well obviously one way is to make sure their families, the families of today have the the infrastructure supports that they need to function, the basics. That's what's so scary about the current presidential campaign. And the Republicans seem to have no no understanding and no compassion for the fact that people need fundamental necessities that they otherwise can't get even if they wanted to work 1000 hours a week. So you need you need a system that allows opportunities for them to for, for the poor, to pull themselves pull themselves to raise up, but they need supports, they need government assistance to do it. I'm not trying to say that we should perpetuate a welfare state I never been in favor of that. But I'm talking about basic necessities, food, housing shelter. I can tell you from the DYFUS kids that I still met, they get mad at me for calling them kids because they say, "Mr. Nick, we're men now and you keep calling us kids." And I said, "Well, you're still my babies. I don't care how old you get." I think they like to hear me say it so. But I can tell you that they they run into problems. And they don't, they're not equipped to resolve them. They just don't have the wherewithal. They don't have the money. They don't have the resources. I can give you story after story I won't, but their story after story about the different issues that, that arise that they will call me about. And if you're interested, I can go into it, but I don't want to just ramble on.

R

Robert Curvin 1:00:58

So here's my challenge. In some ways, I would, I would like to make this conversation, this kind of conversation about young people and who are really the future. People politicians always say, you know, the young people are the future but But you know, once they get in office, there are other things that are their future, right. But I want to make some very clear statement about the policy issues that are [tape ends]